

Consumer Brand Relationships: Overcoming Its Conceptual Challenges and Development of Propositions

Dr. Noor Hasmini Abd Ghani ^{#1}, Md. Kashedul Wahab Tuhin ^{#2}

[#]*Department of Marketing, School of Business Management, Universiti Utara Malaysia, 06010 Sintok, Kedah, Malaysia*

¹hasmini@uum.edu.my

²kashedul@gmail.com

Abstract— A stream of branding researchers considered brands as an active partner of human and this concept is challenged by another group as a brand is an inanimate object. In normal phenomenon, the relationship is formed between two people. The purpose of this paper is to overcome this challenge raised by the critics about a brand as a relationship partner of consumer and to develop the proposition regarding consumer brand relationship to establish common consensus about the relationship from between consumer and brand. This paper critically evaluates the literature about consumer brand relationship from the 1980s and onwards consistent with interpersonal relationship literature. This study explores facets of consumer brand relationship to establish the concept and develop six propositions from relationship context. The first it establishes a brand as a human entity. The second it investigates how brand act as a relationship partner. The third it explores the relationship norms that guide the relationship between consumers and brands. The fourth types of relationships consumers maintain with brands. The fifth it also shows high brand equity is the outcome of strong consumer brand relationship. Lastly, it explores strong loyalty resulted from strong consumer brand relationship. There is a scarcity of consumer brand relationship research that integrates different aspect of the concepts, on which the concept stands, developed by the researchers. This study, therefore, integrates different aspect of consumer brand relationship research and establishes the common notions of consumer brand relationship perspective to overcome its conceptual challenge. There is dearth of research that highlights brand supply chain or brand value delivery strategies from consumer brand relationship perspective on which this gives indication of its basis.

Keywords— *Brand, Consumer brand relationship, Relationship partner, Brand equity, Brand loyalty*

1. Introduction

In this highly competitive and contemporary global economy, companies have been producing quality products and services to make highly satisfied and loyal customers that will ensure their survival [30]. Loyalty ensure company's profitability [17], [30] since loyal customers buy more of the company's products and services [47], [54]), forgive service failure [82] and pay less interest to competitive offerings [58]. The significance of loyalty is more on firm's value as 1 percent increase in customer loyalty impacted five times on a firm's value [24], [68]. Therefore, brand managers relentlessly effort to find the best ways to reach to the destination of customer loyalty.

The way to make consumers loyal is to ensure their satisfaction because loyalty is the function of satisfaction [30]. Over the years, business organizations mainly focus on customer satisfaction as it affects customer retention and market share [38]. Satisfied customers are less influenced by competitors offerings and stay loyal for long time [83]. However, satisfaction alone cannot ensure loyalty since satisfied customers also switched to competitor's offerings. For example, in 1991, Xerox found that though Xerox's customer were satisfied but they are not coming back to Xerox for repeat purchasing [51]. Moreover, brand managers undertake various loyalty programs to keep customers loyal for long time. Nonetheless, these loyalty programs cannot produce desired results. For example, in America, out of twenty consumers less than ten consumers actively take part the loyalty programs [12]. He stated the root cause of failure of loyalty programs is marketers focusing mainly the transactional perspective. He, therefore, suggested strengthening consumer brand relationship will overcome this problem and enhance consumer loyalty for long time.

Recently the significance of the consumer brand relationship study has been acknowledging in marketing studies [73]. Over the years there is a

growing body of literature deals with consumer brand relationships [19]. Researchers used different concepts e.g. self-concept [71], self-connection [28], brand attachment [13], [79], brand love [6], [7] and [11], brand romance [62], brand passion [8], brand commitment [77]. All these studies used different concepts to identify different aspect of consumer brand relationships. However, these studies failed to give holistic overview of consumer brand relationship as a new concept that will help researchers and readers easily comprehend the concept and its basic premises. Moreover, the question still raised by academics and critics how brand (as an inanimate object) becomes relationship partner in interpersonal relationship meaning [15], [64], [69] since in commercial exchange direct contact between individuals is essential [9]. Further, there are also few misunderstandings related to brand relationship and brand loyalty since they are considered as same [50], brand relationship and brand equity.

In this literature review paper, the researchers extensively analysed the consumer brand relationship literature to address the above-mentioned issues. The main objective of this research is to explore the concept of consumer brand relationship and establish brands as a relationship partner. Besides the paper intends to clarify the concept brand loyalty and brand relationship, brand equity, and brand relationship.

2. Consumer brand relationship

The concept consumer brand relationship is defined by [70] as the relationship between consumers and their consumption objects ranges from fleeing of antipathy to slight fondness that is existed in person to person relationship. While ten years later [34] stated brand as active relationship partner for consumers that provides meaning in a psycho-socio-cultural context. Later [44] referred consumer relationship as brand resonance and defined it as consumer feel 'sync' with the brand.

The concept consumer brand relationship has been practicing in the academic arena since last two decades [32]. The first piece of work of consumer brand relationship titled as "Beyond Brand Personality: Building Brand Relationships" is attributed to [16] published in 1993 [31]. Later [29] studied consumer brand relationship dissolution process. However, consumer brand relationship was conceptualized in depth and established as research landscape by the seminal work of [34]. Since then different concepts, perspectives and theories have been introduced to understand the concept consumer brand relationship [32].

3. Brand as a human

To validate brand as a person it is essential to understand ways brands are animated, humanized or personalized [34]. According to the theories of animism, it is needed to anthropomorphize objects because it eases our interactions with the nonmaterial world [53], [80]. Anthropomorphizing of inanimate objects is universally accepted [18] in all societies. Consumers frequently assign personality qualities to these in animate objects [3] and considered brand as a human characteristic [48], [64]. Advertisers' humanize brands and animate their offering which consumers accept [34].

Theories of animism specified three process mechanisms to realize brand in the relationship [34]. First, brands must be possessed by the past spirit and present by other. For example, advertisers use spokespersons so that spokespersons' personality fit those of the advertised brands. To deliver the spirit of the endorser spokespersons are more effective because they endorse brand through usages [52]. Second, the brand objects are completely anthropomorphized that is a transfer of thought, emotion, and volition. People selectively assign human characteristics to consumer goods [14], [67] but mostly food, clothing, drinks [37] and technologies of household [55]. Third, brands must possess personification qualification. [10] showed different technique how a brand is personified that elicits emotions and feelings. Brands must act as an active and contributing member of the relationship dyad. Marketing actions, daily marketing tactics, and strategies are the behaviour carried out by the brands that can be regarded its active relationship role. These behaviours are considered as traits which are the basis of evaluation of person [74]. Therefore, following the above discussion we can propose:

Proposition-1: Consumers considered brand as human entity.

4. Brand as a relationship partner

Brands are considered as relationship partner [4], [34] and [36]. This relationship is not out of controversy because people and objects vary in different ways [4]. However, [70] and [33] identified consumer and object relationships are the same as the relationship between two people. They proposed the bonding between consumers and objects are same as between two persons like friendship, marriage etc. [34]. Moreover, relationship means a sequence of interactions between the parties involve where future interactions are different from the first interaction

with a stranger [40]. The same theme has been reflected in the consumer brand relationships study of [34] and [78]. Based on different relationship dimensions they identified different type of consumer brand relationships. Their proposed consumer relationships with brands range from casual friends to arranged marriages which consumers manage in different relationship stages and situations. Therefore, [4] stated consumers' interactions with brands are the same as their social interactions with other individuals. He identified two reasons for this. First, for service brand and brands combining both product and services, consumers find no differences between brands and their manufacturers. They considered brands and the company as same. Consumers follow the procedures of social relationships when they interact with the representative of the service brands. Second, some consumers considered the brand of physical product as a living being. In human-computer interaction, [56] showed that social rules governed interpersonal relationships. Objects possess souls as well known in the product domain [37]. People, therefore, assign human-like properties to brands and interact with them the way parallel to social relationships as a partner [4]. Based on the above discussion the following proposition is stated:

Proposition-2: Brand act as a relationship partner in consumer brand relationship.

5. Consumer brand relationships norms

Other than forming relationship with all the people lived in a society, a person is selective in relationship formation. A distinct set of relationship norms guide these relationships [4]. Social psychology identified human relationships are primarily based on two factors: economic and social factors [23]. They classify these factors as exchange relationships and communal relationships. Exchange relationships are called liquid pro quo that is people give something to partners to get something in return [4]. On the other side, in communal relationships, people offer benefits to others only for their concern to others or to fulfil other's needs like in the family or friendly relationships [4]. Authors [21], [22] and [23] identified exchange and communal norms of relationships as presented in the table-1.

Consumer researchers recently have noted that consumers regard their relationship with brands in the same way as interpersonal relationship existed between two people in social context [4], [34]. Researchers showed that these communal and exchange relationship norms influence consumers'

responses to brand against the actions of brands [5]. Violation of these implicit and explicit rules is

Table 1. Exchange and communal norms of relationships

Exchange Relationships Norms	Communal Relationships Norms
Accepting help with money is preferred to no payment.	Accepting help with no monetary payment is preferred.
Desirable to give comparable benefits in return for benefits received.	Less desirable to give comparable benefits in return for benefits received.
Prompt payment for specific benefits received is expected.	Prompt repayment for specific benefits received is not expected.
More likely to ask for payments for benefits rendered.	Less likely to ask for payments for benefits rendered.
Helping others is less likely.	Less likely to keep track of individual inputs and outcomes in a joint task.
Requesting help from others is less likely.	Divide rewards according to each person's needs and requirements.
Keeping track of others' needs is less likely.	Helping others is more likely.
Less responsive to others' emotional states.	Requesting help from others is more likely.
	Keeping track of others needs is more likely.
	More responsive to others' emotional states.

called brand transgression [2] as like transgression happens between two persons in interpersonal relationships. Ref. [4] showed that consumers evaluate a brand negatively when the brand's action violate these relationship norms and vice versa. Consequently, it can be posited that:

Proposition-3: Interpersonal relationship norms guide the consumer brand relation.

6. Brand supply chain or value delivery network strategies depend on the types of consumer brand relationships

Consumers throughout their life span develop relationship with brand [42] and maintain different relationships with different brands. Consumers' brand relationships can be summarized for given brand and category using different relationship types [34]. These relationships take different forms

with different strength and nature [42]. Using [75] “Triangular Theory of Love” [70] identified eight different types of relationships as non-liking, liking, infatuation, functionalism, inhibited desire, utilitarianism, succumbed desire, loyalty. The basis of these relationships is underlying motivation, emotion, and cognition. Ref. [34] urged the importance of relationship types for brand personality development and for relationship maintenance requirement. She identified fifteen types relationships consumers maintain with brands such as arrange marriage, causal friends, marriage of convenience, committed partnerships, best friends, compartmentalized friendship, kinships, rebounds, childhood friendships, courtships, dependencies, flings, enmities, secret affairs, enslavements. Ref. [42] identified the types of brand relationship from children brand relationship perception perspective. Children form relationships with different brand, they identified them and store and retrieve information about brands from past interactions with them. Ref. [42] identified ten different types of relationships children maintain with brands such as first love, true love, arrange marriage, secret admire, true friend, fun buddy old buddy, acquaintance, one-night stand, enmity. Ref. [66] criticized [42] children brand relationship types as he overlooked interdependence and intimacy aspect of a relationship, [66] proposed four relationship style: uberbrand relationships, lifestyle relationships, fad relationships, and phase relationships. Ref. [78] also explore the types of consumer brand relationship from service industry context. Their study supported [34] fifteen types of brand relationship, in addition, they proposed love-hate relationship under friendly-hostile dimensions since consumers engaged in a brand relationship with positive and negative affect.

The identification of relationship types is important from brand supply chain and value delivery network perspectives. For each type of relationship, relationship maintenance requirement and the values consumers expect are different. For example, arrange marriages type of relationship requires exclusive commitment with low levels of attachment intended for long-term consideration where committed partnerships require high levels of trust, intimacy and love [34]. Nonetheless, the requirements are short-term and reciprocal demands for flings types of relationships [34]. Similarly, value requirements for each types of relationship consumers form with brands differ. Therefore, it can be proposed that:

Proposition-4: Brand supply chain or value delivery network strategies depend on the types of consumer brand relationships.

7. Consumer brand relationship and brand equity

Ref. [1] defined brand equity as “a set of assets (and liabilities) linked to a brand’s name and symbol that adds to (or subtracts from) the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or that firm’s customers. He identified four major types of assets brands create brand awareness, loyalty, perceived quality, and associations. Brand equity creates value for both consumers and firms. However, [44] considered brand equity only from consumers’ point of view and titled it as ‘Consumer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE)’. He defined brand equity as positive differential affects a brand has in its consumer minds. He showed CBBE pyramid consisted of six blocks as brand salience, brand performance, brand imagery, brand judgment, brand feelings and brand resonance. Ref. [72] stated that a brand drives a significant portion of value from brand association and brand image created in the mind of consumers which are generated from interaction, communications, brand experiences and other activities that nurture the relationships. Therefore, there is a link between consumers and brands. Ref. [78] called this link as consumer bonding with brands that [45] defined as brand resonance. He defined the brand resonance as consumers’ relationship with the brands. It means how consumers act, feel attached, and think about the brand. This is the final stage of consumer based brand equity [45]. In the brand equity development process, strong brands need to reach the final stage of the development process that is brand resonance [65]. Thus, we can posit that:

Proposition-5: High-level of brand equity is achieved through strong consumer brand relationship

8. Consumer brand relationship and loyalty

The prime focus of marketing strategy is to create and maintain customer brand loyalty [49]. According to [41] brand loyalty means “a biased behavioural response expressed over time by some decision-making unit with respect to one or more alternative brands out of a set of such brands”. Though the concept of loyalty is more than seventy years old [24] the measure and understanding of it is still lacking [35]. Market loyalty behaviour is considered as purchase, positive recommendation, a share of purchase. However, till now there is a lack of consensus regarding its definitions and measures [39]. According to them researchers mainly concerned two types of loyalty: the first-primary loyalty or behavioural loyalty or purposive repeat purchase which [26] defined as aggregate repeat purchase of an individual e.g. purchase,

volume, frequency, retention, and share. The second type is attitudinal loyalty that includes positive word of mouth, referrals, and advocacy. These aspects of loyalty have the less predictive capacity; therefore, the third stream of loyalty is proposed by researchers from the relational perspective that focus on belief and feelings [59]. [35] called this hedonic or emotive aspect of brand loyalty. This relational aspect of loyalty is much richer than a conventional behavioural framework [39] and consumer brand relationship build up brand loyalty [4]. Ref. [61] also supported the notion that consumer brand relationship plays a critical role in building customer loyalty. Empirical studies [27], [61], [81] also showed that strong consumer brand relationship positively influenced brand loyalty. Therefore, it can be proposed that

Proposition-6: Strong brand loyalty is guided by consumer brand relationship.

9. Conclusion

Summing up, though the newest discipline in marketing literature, consumer brand relationship is an established concept. It is developed as metaphoric concept from the interpersonal relationship. Consumers consider brand as human and developed and maintain the relationship with brands as they existed between two people. It is established that consumers not only consider brand as human but also consider brand as an active partner in relationship dyad. The relationship between consumer and brand also follow the relationship norms, communal or exchange relationships, as followed by persons in an interpersonal relationship [4]. Qualitative studies by authors [34] [42], [43], [60], [19] identified consumer brand relationship as a distinct concept, its types and dimensions where quantitative studies of different authors [2], [20], [46], [63], [76] explain and generalize the phenomenon. These studies establish consumer brand relationship as separate construct.

This paper digs into the origin of the concept of consumer brand relationship extend the understanding of the concept, establishes it as a separate concept removing the misconception of academicians as they raised question how a brand become a relationship partner, identifies the fundamental basis of the concept and suggests for its value delivery network. The propositions have been drawn from the existing knowledge of the literature which has been validated and verified by empirical studies. From the academic point of view, this is a comprehensive study regarding consumer brand relationship that assimilates the concept of consumer brand relationship and its different perspectives. This research accumulates

the different point of view of researchers to come to a common consensus and avoid the misconception existed among researchers. From a managerial point of view, this research help manager to understand in depth the concept of consumer brand relationship and its types that they can apply in maintain their brand relationships with consumers. The nature of brand supply chain and value delivery network developed base on the conceptualization of brand. Companies supply chain or value delivery network differs for different types of relationship (e.g., marriage, best friend, committed partnership, childhood friends, enmities etc.) a brand forms with its consumers. The managers will get their understanding about the concept, its types, dimensions, nature and fundamentals of relationships consumers build with their brands and it will help them take strategic decision in branding, designing its supply chain and value delivery network. Despite these, this researcher could have been considered more numbers of research works of other authors which would enable it to draw some other propositions. However, this research will help future researchers clearly understand the consumer brand relationship concept, its nature, types, and dimensions as existed in the literature. Based on this ground future researchers can understand the present status of consumer brand relationship and extend the concept. Further research should be conducted to empirically investigate how the consumer brand relationship concept would be strengthen and to develop value delivery model for each type of consumer brand relationship. Future quantitative research will help generalized the concept from different context.

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